




The
Harmonica
according to
Charlie Musselwhite





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- Side 1**
1. Harpin' On A Riff 3.32
 2. Run Here Mama 3.26
 3. Tuff 2.48
 4. Pistol In Your Face 4.06
 5. Azul Para Amparo. 1.38
 6. Blues All Night. 3.25
 7. Fast Life Blues. 2.00

- Side 2**
1. Way I Feel 4.02
 2. Chicago Sunset 3.35
 3. Blues In The Dark 1.55
 4. Shelby County Blues 2.55
 5. Scufflin' 2.32
 6. Hard Times 3.43

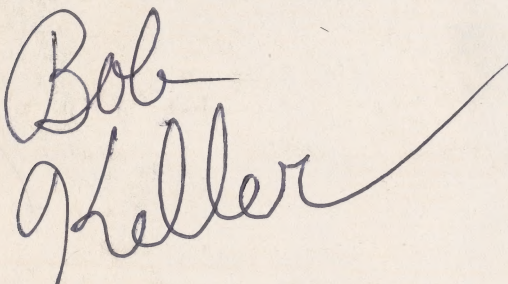
Recorded at Livingston Studio, London, England.
Engineered by Nic Kinsey

CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE Harmonicas
SAM MITCHELL Acoustic and Electric Guitars
and Mandolin

STEFAN GROSSMAN Acoustic Guitar
STEVE YORK Bass
JEFF RICH Drums and Percussion
BOB HALL Piano
Sleeve design by Wagner Design Unit

FRONT PHOTO: JON SIEVERT

Produced by Stefan Grossman




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According to Big Joe Williams, "Charlie Musselwhite is one of the greatest living harp players of country blues. He is right up there with Sonny Boy Williamson, and he's been my harp player ever since Sonny Boy got killed."

Big Joe Williams has been playing the blues most of his life and today, at 75, he is as strong and vital as ever. At 18, Williams toured the South with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels tent show; in the early 1920s he cut his first 78 for the Vocalion label; and from 1937 until 1948 Big Joe's frequent partner was John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson, perhaps the first real virtuoso of the blues harp.

In short, Big Joe knows the blues—better than most of us could ever imagine. Of course, his praise for Musselwhite, some 40 years his junior, could be considered a bit biased. The two met in Chicago in the early 1960s and became close friends. In fact they roomed together for a time in the basement of Delmark Record Company. Joe recalls, that Charlie, then 18, "came from Memphis, Tennessee, with his guitar. He was pretty good on guitar, but I got him to lay it down and pick up the harp. I saw what his talent was."

Big Joe may have a soft spot in his heart reserved for Charlie, but he is not the only veteran bluesman who views the young harmonica player in an especially bright light. Slide guitarist Homesick James states without hesitation that "Charlie is about the best going today. He knows how to play, what to play, and when to play."

Today Charles Douglas Musselwhite III is in the unique position of being looked upon as an equal by older, established blues musicians and as somewhat of a mentor by members of the rock world many of whom belong to the same generation as Charlie, who is 34 (born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, in 1944). Performers as far-flung as Carlos Santana and Phoebe Snow have listed Musselwhite as one who influenced them in their musically formative years. Country-rock harmonica star Norton Buffalo can recollect a leaner time when his record collection had been whittled down to only the bare essentials *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band* and *Stand Back! Here comes Charlie Musselwhite's South Side Band*.

Butterfield and Musselwhite are probably the two most interesting, and possibly most important, products of what has been called the "white blues movement," not only because they were near the forefront chronologically, but because they each stand out as being especially faithful to the style. Because for them it was not a "movement"; it was simply the music they loved, which reflected the lifestyles they lived. And, for a combination of musical and personal reasons, the two are respected as peers by most of the blues singers who are now regarded as legends. There is not even the slightest hint of condescension—none of the "white boy lost in the blues" attitude that Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee sang of—when Muddy Waters talks of Charlie Musselwhite. When the two recently performed together in San Francisco, they had a chance to reminisce backstage about the various rough-and-tumble dives which have come and gone in Chicago. "That took a lot of nerve to do what you white boys did back then," Muddy concluded. "But you and Paul didn't give a damn."

As the late Roy Ruby, who grew up with Mike Bloomfield in the suburbs outside Chicago and later became Charlie's bassist, once described Charlie: "He was no 'folknik.' Like, Michael and I were both folkniks, white kids who had heard about this other kind of music. But Charlie's attitude toward everything was so incredibly pure, so beautiful. There was a long time when Charlie was playing and no one really thought he would ever be anything other than an amateur. Mike was already a professional, and I had imaginings of being a jazz musician—but Charlie would never think of it that way. He just said, "I love this music," and he'd spend a lot of time playing it and listening to it. For a while it didn't occur to me that he would get better and better; I thought he'd reached a level or something. But he did—he just got better and better, until I liked his playing so much!"

In his liner notes to Charlie's second Vanguard album, *Stone Blues*, Pete Welding also pinpointed this "pure" attitude Musselwhite possesses: "With Charlie, it always

was the music that was important. Whatever was necessary to make the music as good as it could be, that's what he'd do. And joyfully too. The song passed through him; he was its medium. He was as much a vibrating reed for the purposes of the song's articulation as any one of the thin metal tines in one of the harmonicas he has come to blow so well. No ego trips for him—then or now. He plays the songs he does simply because he thinks they're good, honest songs; then he does everything in his power to put the songs—not himself—across. What he loves and what he performs, solely, is blues."

Charlie's attachment to the blues began while he was still a teenager in Memphis. Of course, at that time in the South schools were segregated, so while Charlie's classmates were listening to the rockabilly sounds so popular in that area of the country, Charlie was on the other side of town digging the blues and R & B. "I wasn't in with the school clique," he admits; "I wasn't part of that rigmarole that was 'high school life.' Lots of times I'd be hanging out in the black neighbourhood, and they didn't understand that too much. Sometimes they'd ask me to play with them, but I couldn't make it because I had something better to do on the other side of town."

After reading Sam Charters' book *The Country Blues*, Musselwhite discovered that many of the old-time blues singers were still living right in town. "They had a book called the Blue Book," Charlie recounts, "and it listed everybody by address and by name, whether they had a phone or not. And after I read *The Country Blues*, I looked up Will Shade, Gus Cannon, and Furry Lewis."

Soon Charlie became a frequent visitor and friend to the former members of the Memphis Jug Band and Cannon's Jug Stompers and began fooling around on guitar and harp—learning the blues more through osmosis than by sitting down and studying. Charlie learned guitar tunes such as "Going to Brownsville" from Furry Lewis and "Newport News" from Will Shade, who also taught him the rudiments of the harmonica.

Upon graduating from high school, Charlie headed for Chicago. It has been inaccurately reported in the past that this move was prompted by Charlie's love for the blues—that he moved north in search of Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf. Indeed, some young whites did gravitate towards the Windy City because of its music; for instance, Elvin Bishop enrolled at the University of Chicago because, in his words, "I knew that was where the blues thing was." But Charlie set his sights on Chicago for the same reason as most blacks who had migrated north—the elusive \$3.00 an hour job. And like most transplanted blacks, he didn't fare much better in Chicago than he had in Memphis.

But he did, accidentally, run into the blues. Living in the South Side black ghetto (the only neighbourhood he could afford), Musselwhite soon realized that he was surrounded by blues performers whose records he'd collected back in Memphis. Charlie was a familiar face at nightclubs like Pepper's, Turner's, and Theresa's even before it gradually became known that he also played a little harmonica in his spare time.

Eventually, Charlie began sitting in with many of the pioneers of Chicago blues harp, including Little Walter Jacobs and Shakey Walter Horton. When Little Walter would occasionally blow from a front row table with his microphone stretching up to his amplifier on stage—Charlie would often be sitting beside him. Sometimes Walter would stop in mid-chorus and hand the harp to Musselwhite with the simple instruction, "Blow!" Johnny Shines remembers that "Charlie used to follow Shakey Horton around like he was his father." Musselwhite was even acquainted with the legendary Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller), though he is the first to admit that "nobody really knew Sonny Boy very well."

After landing a steady gig as part of Johnny Young's band, Charlie's skills on harp got all that much more refined, thanks in part to the instrumentation of the group. Charlie recounts, "We played at Rose & Kelly's Lounge, and everybody came down there. Johnny was on guitar, with Houston Phillips on drums, and on harp were me, Big John Wrencher, Shakey Horton, Harmonica Willie, and "Good Rockin'" Charles, Charles Edwards. We just had one harp plugged into Johnny's amp, and we'd pass it back and forth, trading solos. Sometimes Floyd Jones played bass, or sometimes Carey Bell played

bass and would double on harp, so then there'd be maybe five or six harp players." The "cutting" that went on in this all-star harmonica lineup was, of course, good natured, but such peer pressure surely had a positive effect on Musselwhite's blowing.

Over the years Charlie Musselwhite has been called upon to play on sessions by such blues singers as John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Witherspoon, Big Joe Williams, John Hammond, Shakey Horton, Johnnie Lewis, and L.C. "Good Rockin'" Robinson—in addition to his nine LPs as a leader.

Actually, the enclosed album (recorded last January in London) came about as a result of a book Charlie had written on how to play blues harmonica—a project that had consumed much of his spare time for several years. When Charlie had completed the book, he asked Kicking Mule's ED Denson to publish it, and it was decided that an album should be recorded to illustrate the techniques and sounds discussed in the manual. Charlie has in the past given private lessons out of his home in San Jose, California, and at any of his local club appearances there is always a bevy of aspiring harpists watching and listening intently.

The book is an exhaustive, no-punches-pulled analysis of the elements that make up blues harp. The enclosed album exemplifies the same, but not in any methodic, academic way—as is immediately made apparent with "Harpin' On A Riff." The methods are presented in the context where they are normally found—that of a good-rockin' blues band.

The LP is designed for blues fans in general and harp fans (and players) in particular. The material here represents more variety than has been on any of Charlie's previous outings—and probably those of any other harp players. The many forms and shadings of the blues are all here—thanks to Musselwhite's superior versatility.

Each cut places the harmonica in a slightly different format. "Blues In The Dark," played on a chromatic harp, is Charlie's tribute to George "Harmonica" Smith who first recorded the tune. Charlie considers Smith "a real monster—especially on chromatic." "Scufflin'," a fast shuffle in A with Charlie switching harmonicas several times (using harps in different keys to obtain more notes in the key of A), hints at the influence of Little Walter. Charlie describes saxophonist Ace Cannon's instrumental "Tuff" as a "sort of hillbilly tune," but it is interesting to point out that the song's chord structure is also close to that of many R & B ballads, such as Slim Harpo's "Raining In My Heart" and Little Richard's "Send Me Some Loving."

And then there's the acoustic numbers. "Shelby County Blues" probably comes closest to the type of thing Musselwhite might have played with Furry Lewis or Will Shade back in Memphis (which is located in Shelby County). "Chicago Sunset" is in the Jimmy Reed vein (especially when Charlie shoots up to the high register) with an interjected theme reminiscent of "Canadian Sunset." "Fast Life Blues," with producer Stefan Grossman joining Sam Mitchell on guitar, is more in the Eastern Seaboard style à la Blind Boy Fuller or Brownie McGhee. And though "Hard Times" comes from Ray Charles' repertoire (it was used to spotlight saxophonist David "Fathead" Newman), Charlie's rendition—with Sam Mitchell's guitar providing a sort of clip-clop rhythm—sounds closer to country and western.

But easily the most interesting tune is "Azul Para Amparo," which is Charlie's rough Spanish translation for "Blues For Amparo," Charlie's wife. The song, an original Latin-flavoured piece, is played in a minor key in "fourth position" on the harp. And though the idea of a blues harpist playing a Latin number may seem as appropriate as teaming bagpipes with a modern jazz group (which Sonny Rollins has already done, by the way), Charlie handles the style with great authority and originality.

Now for those of you who don't know what fourth position is, much less how to play it.... well, you'll just have to read Charlie's book. And for those of you who'd just as soon play your stereo as play the harmonica, that's okay too. After all, Charlie has commanded a strong, loyal following for more than a decade, and all those people couldn't be harpists, could they?

Well, maybe with Charlie's new album and book they really could.

Dan Forte, 1978



KM 305 — Side One

33 1/3 RPM
(KM 305-A)

CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE

1. Harpin' On A Riff
2. Run Here Mama
3. Tuff (Ace Cannon — Palace Music)
4. Pistol In Your Face
5. Azul Para Amparo
6. Blues All Night
7. Fast Life Blues

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KM 305 — Side Two

33 1/3 RPM
(KM 305-B)

CHARLIE MUSSELWHITE

1. Way I Feel
2. Chicago Sunset
3. Blues In The Dark (G. Smith — Sparta Music)
4. Shelby County Blues
5. Scufflin'
6. Hard Times (P. Mitchell - Carlin Music)

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